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2 **BEFORE THE STATE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORITY**
3 **STATE OF NEVADA**

4 In Re:
5 Nevada Connections Academy Notice of
6 Closure or Possible Board Reconstitution
7

8 **DECLARATION OF STEVE WERLEIN**

9 I, Steve Werlein, hereby declare under penalty of perjury as follows:

10 1. I am a Nevada Connections Academy (“NCA”) employee. I make this
11 declaration in support of NCA relative to closure proceedings before the State Public Charter
12 School Authority held on May 25, 26, and 27, 2017, and continued to an unspecified date in
13 2017.
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15 2. The matters set forth in this declaration are based on my own personal knowledge.
16 If called upon to testify, I am competent to testify to the matters set forth herein.
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18 3. I have been with NCA since July of 2013. Currently, my title is “School Leader,”
19 which equates to Executive Director in that I manage a team of School Principals and Senior
20 Management in the areas of counseling, assessment, and special education. I have served as an
21 educational leader for 15 years, and an educator for 20 years. Prior to my employment with
22 NCA, I spent four years as the Head of School at Gateway College Preparatory School in
23 Georgetown, Texas, which is one of the highest rated high schools in the Austin, Texas area.
24 There, I was involved in starting the school and pioneering programs in blended learning within
25 Advanced Placement curricula supported by robust extra-curricular and athletic programs. Prior
26 to my work with Gateway College Prep, I served as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction
27 and Interim Principal at Henry Ford Academy-Powerhouse High in the North Lawndale
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1 neighborhood of Chicago. There, I helped to found a school serving a 100% minority, 95% FRL
2 population, based on the award-winning Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies (“PAS”)
3 curriculum. My other roles in education have included serving as the Principal and Director of
4 Fox Valley Technical and Trade Center in North Aurora, Illinois which was a vocationally-
5 focused school for severely behaviorally and emotionally challenged youth, and as an Assistant
6 Principal at H.W. Cowherd Middle School on the east side of Aurora, Illinois, which serves a
7 majority Spanish-speaking population.
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9 4. My role at NCA requires that I ensure the overall compliance of the school with
10 applicable federal and state policies, and operate the school in a financially sound and ethical
11 manner based on the Connections Education core model and Board policy. I have overall
12 responsibility for all hiring and programmatic decisions, and I directly manage those who
13 oversee our K-12 programs, assessment, counseling, and special education. To ensure that the
14 school operates effectively, I look at student and staff level data on a daily basis and
15 subsequently take action to ensure that actionable steps are taken to address deficiencies.
16 Additionally, my position requires that I interact with a wide variety of stakeholders within the
17 school community as a whole.
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19 5. While the academic achievement of students at all grade levels has been and will
20 continue to be central to NCA’s operation, the recent attention drawn to the high school’s
21 “graduation rate” has caused much of my time and energy to be focused on improvement
22 through operational and programmatic interventions. The heightened focus placed on the high
23 school’s “4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate” has caused us to examine both the “inputs”
24 (students entering the school) and “outputs” (students exiting the school—whether or not they
25 have actually graduated). I have become deeply involved, along with members of my school
26 team and Connections Education, on developing a greater understanding of WHEN high school
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1 students come to NCA, WHY they come to NCA, and WHAT we can do to best meet their
2 needs. It has become readily apparent that, of the nearly 50% of NCA’s high school population
3 that enrolls in NCA credit-deficient, many have entered the school after being encouraged to do
4 so by their previous school—and many look to NCA as a school of last resort. My work with this
5 population and the challenges that they present has not changed the school’s desire and mission
6 to serve all students, but has caused some programmatic enhancements to better meet their needs.
7 Students are routinely “counseled” out of their zoned schools when it is ascertained that they will
8 not graduate within the 4-year cohort window. These students are generally disengaged, and
9 view graduation as an unattainable goal. NCA has focused additional time and resources on
10 providing students with frequent, targeted contacts which are the basis of developing quality
11 relationships with caring adults—in this case, NCA staff. We have seen the results of this
12 approach by carefully tracking student data, which has shown an increase in the number and
13 quality of contacts. Additionally, we have expanded our credit recovery program and have well
14 over 500 students participating in it. Again, through the use of student data, we have seen a
15 marked decrease in student failure and an increase in credit accrual—which is the cornerstone to
16 increasing NCA’s graduation rate.

19 6. Despite NCA’s efforts to increase the graduation rate by implementing programs
20 to assist its existing students, it is likely, if not inevitable, that, as NCA continues to enroll more
21 credit-deficient students throughout each school year, NCA’s graduation rate will not increase
22 overall because each new credit-deficient student enrolled results in an immediate drop of the
23 graduation rate.

25 7. Given the high transiency rate of our student population, NCA has taken
26 additional steps to locate departing non-graduates and transfers both through internal work and
27 with the assistance of a private investigator. The latter was implemented at the suggestion of
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1 State Public Charter School Authority (“SPCSA”) Executive Director Patrick Gavin. These
2 efforts, combined with academic and behavioral interventions have led to increases in both the 4-
3 year adjusted cohort graduation rate and other measures of success within the high school.

4 8. With the support of our Board of Directors, NCA has created and implemented a
5 comprehensive graduation rate improvement plan, which I coordinated and am ultimately
6 accountable for. All efforts to improve secondary school performance are captured within this
7 plan, which was received positively by the SPCSA board in May 2016.

9 9. During my work in charter, district, and alternative schools across the country, I
10 have extensive experience with navigating the sometimes complex relationship between school
11 leadership and those in governance positions. With that noted, I have never worked with a more
12 talented, diverse, or dedicated board of directors than that of NCA. Each board member is
13 invested in the success of our school and is not afraid to ask difficult questions or drive difficult
14 discussions to remain well-informed. Among our board members are university-level educators,
15 school administrators, business owners, parents, secondary teachers, and others who are
16 dedicated to ensuring that NCA remains the best virtual school option in the state of Nevada.
17 Board members’ reliable presence at formal and informal SPCSA meetings, school events, and
18 regular, active participation in our own board meetings are a testament to their commitment.

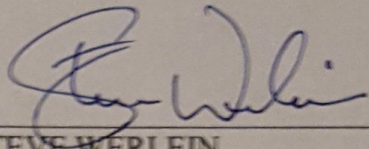
19 20. NCA was placed on the “Priority School List” due to its low 4-year adjusted
21 cohort graduation rate in 2015. As a school committed to proactively addressing the concerns of
22 both its authorizer and state agencies, NCA requested a meeting with SPCSA staff in September
23 2015. Present at this meeting from the school were myself, NCA Counsel Laura Granier, Board
24 President Jafeth Sanchez, SPCSA Executive Director Patrick Gavin, and Deputy Attorney
25 General Greg Ott. NCA requested the meeting to actively seek input on addressing the 4-year
26 adjusted cohort graduation rate and to acknowledge the unique challenges facing NCA and
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1 schools like it, as a result of enrolling a high population of credit-deficient students. At this
2 meeting, Director Gavin told NCA’s representatives that the Authority had “bigger fish to fry”
3 and that, because we had three years left on our charter, he did not expect that the Authority
4 would take immediate action to address NCA’s graduation rate in any way.

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6 11. In February 2016, with no prior notice, the SPCSA placed NCA on its agenda for
7 possible issuance of a “Notice of Closure.” The SPCSA subsequently removed this provision,
8 and took no action regarding the same. However, the SPCSA again placed NCA on its agenda
9 for possible issuance of a “Notice of Closure” in March 2016. The SPCSA board heard
10 testimony on the matter, and did not issue the notice of closure. In September 2016 and again in
11 February 2017, the board voted to issue a “Notice of Closure” to the school based on the 4-year
12 adjusted cohort graduation rate for both 2015 and 2016 cohorts. After these notices were issued,
13 NCA attempted to seek input from SPCSA staff, which yielded little to no discussion,
14 collaboration, or input from SPCSA staff in response. The few conversations between SPCSA
15 staff and NCA representatives were focused on NCA’s unwillingness to sign waivers of its
16 judicial review.
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18 12. At no time has the SPCSA and SPCSA staff issued to NCA a “Notice of
19 Concern,” a “Notice of Breach,” or any of the intervention measures that precede a “Notice of
20 Closure” as prescribed by the SPCSA’s Intervention Framework, nor did the SPCSA or SPCSA
21 staff notify NCA that the SPCSA’s Intervention Framework would not apply to the school.
22 Members of SPCSA staff have told NCA repeatedly that the only “issue” concerning staff is
23 NCA’s high school’s 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, which constitutes one measure in
24 the Performance Framework. Neither the SPCSA nor SPCSA staff have identified additional
25 concerns with NCA’s K-12 operation.
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1 I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Nevada that the
2 foregoing is true and corrected and was executed this 12th day of June, 2017, in Reno
3 Nevada.

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7 STEVE WERLEIN
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